

COMPLIMENTARY

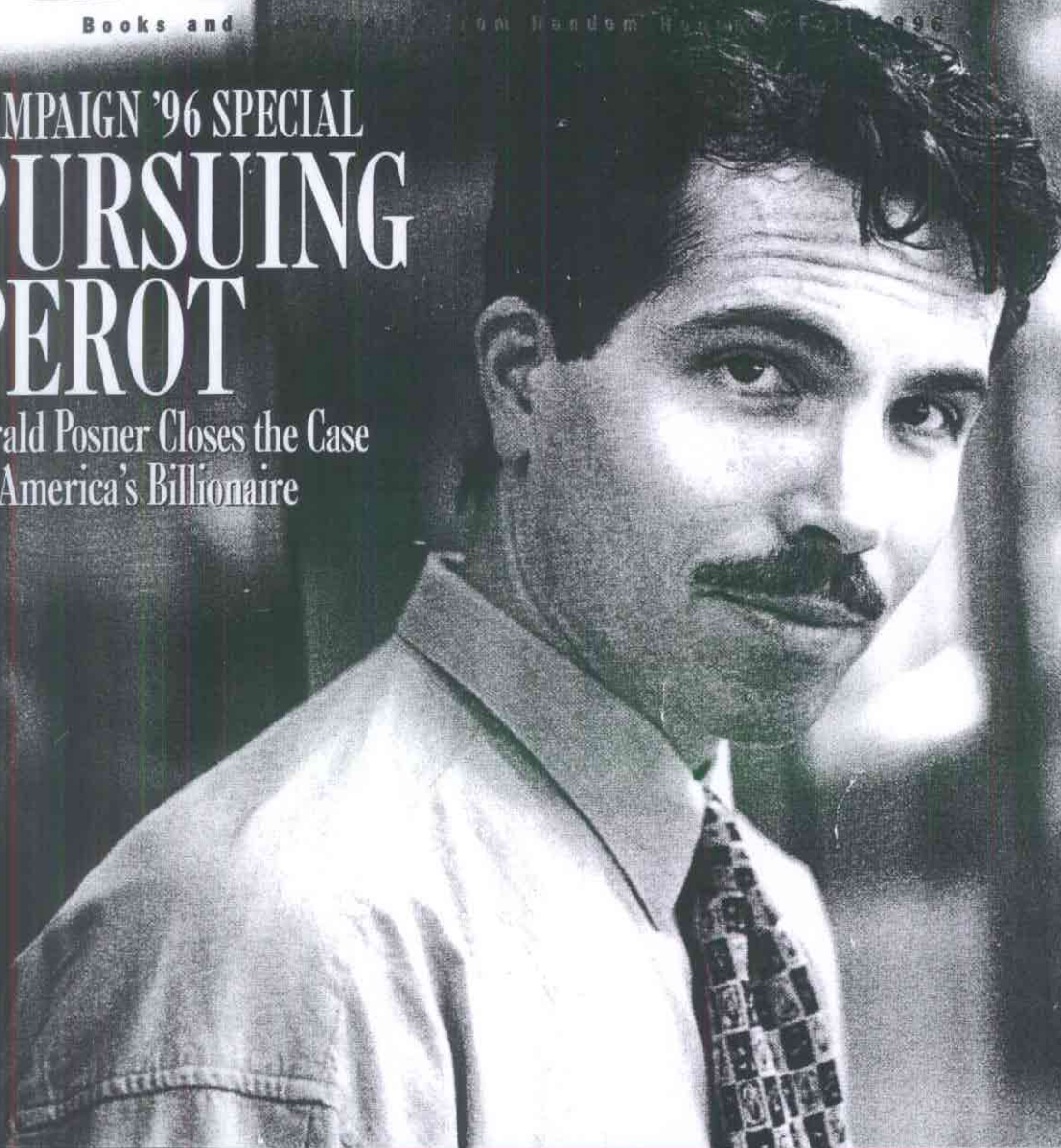
AT RANDOM

Books and

No.15

CAMPAIGN '96 SPECIAL PURSUING PEROT

Gerald Posner Closes the Case
on America's Billionaire



MARIO PUZO: Literary Godfather
JAMES HILLMAN: Soul Man
JOHN RICHARDSON on Picasso

The Trials of JEFFREY TOOBIN
How to Edit WILLIAM E. BUCKLEY
The Secret Life of HENRY JAMES

JIMMY CARTER • DAVID REMNICK • WHAT SCORSESE IS READING

IN THE ARENA

The runaway success of *Primary Colors* by now-you-know-who suggests that the popular disaffection with electoral politics may be exaggerated. Given a good plot, a snake-oil salesman who might be a saint (or vice versa), a nutcase who might be a genius (or vice versa), a wheeler dealer who is a wheeler dealer, and a few moral perplexities that need not even be sexual, the tent can still be packed. None of the above characterizations bears any resemblance, of course, to any person living or dead who may be taking part in the 1996 presidential election. But the plot for '96 is thickening nicely. Colin won't. Will Ross? Can Bill surf Whitewater? Will Bob miss Pat's booby traps?

This fall edition of *At Random* has a focus on presidential politics on the eve of the election that will give us a president for the twenty-first century. We have an agenda for this president, or rather twelve agendas written by twelve authors invited to identify the one thing they would do in the White House.

So much for policy. Many of us despair of the way these days it is supplanted by the sound-bite smear and the petty maneuvers so comically exposed in *Primary Colors*. Much of the tab talk about "character" is no more than prurience on stilts. It is therefore all the more surprising to find the forty-second president, something of a policy wonk himself, justifying the media's obsession with the personal lives of candidates. Jimmy Carter talks to Geoff Shandler about his new book, *Living Faith*.

Carter's moral sanction for personal inquiry would have been a comfort to Gerald Posner when his inquiry into third-party politics in 1994 turned into nothing less than a full-scale

biography of Ross Perot. Ross did not like it: is that clear? Answer's quite simple: Posner must be working for one of the rascals running for office. Posner is not easily put off. It was Posner who single-handedly and single-mindedly in 1993 finally put to rest all the conspiracy theories on the killing of President Kennedy in his incisive book *Case Closed*. So he kept up his Perot inquiries, and he describes what happened in "Ross & Me" on page 34: the indefatigable in pursuit of the infallible. It is an indispensable preview of the biography *Citizen Perot*, to be published in September, when Ross, we imagine, will be running hard at the electorate—and maybe at Posner. Who knows? He found much to admire.

And then there's Monica. When I was editing *Beyond Peace*, the last book President Nixon wrote before his death, a young postgraduate student, Monica Crowley, was present at most of our meetings as researcher and policy assistant. She said little, but she took in a lot. How much became apparent only this year when, unexpectedly, Monica presented Random House with an engrossing account of her conversations with the thirty-seventh president in her four years as his professional confidante. Some of them with particular relevance to this presidential election—there's a lot about Bob and Bill—will be published in August under the title *Nixon Off the Record*. The candor and vivacity of his insights on people and politics is extraordinary. There is a question, of course, of confidentiality and trust. It is clear Nixon would never have wished these remarks published in his lifetime; but it is equally clear they are his real views and that he wanted them permanently on the record. ■

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President and Publisher, Random House Trade Group

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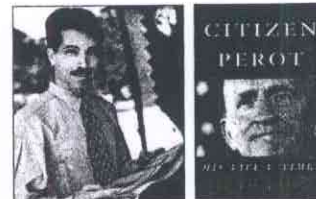
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ON THE COVER: *CITIZEN PEROT* AUTHOR GERALD POSNER BY CHRISTOPHER BIERLEIN.

JON KARP'S ACCESSION

From this edition, there is a new editor of *At Random*. Random House senior editor Jon Karp, a frequent contributor, succeeds Helen Morris as editor; he will conduct the magazine with Sean Abbott, who has been managing editor. When we conceived the idea of *At Random* four years ago, Helen was crucial to the rapid establishment of the magazine and its gratifying reception. Though Helen retains an editorial connection with Random House, she is now an associate of Martin Scorsese, the film director, and we wish her well on behalf of Random House and *At Random*'s extended family of readers.

H. M. E.

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ROSS & ME

How America's billionaire entered my life

BY GERALD POSNER

The voice on my answering machine was unmistakable. "Gerald. This is Ross Perot. I understand you have a question for me. Call me when you can."

I was surprised. Although I had been researching a book about Perot for nearly a year, *CITIZEN PEROT* [Random House, August], I had not yet asked to interview him. In talks with his son-in-law, Clay Mulford, I had mentioned a few issues I hoped eventually to discuss with Perot. Now, in August 1995, Perot had obviously taken one of those matters as an invitation to call.

When I reached him, phase one of our relationship began. There were no pleasantries; he did not seem to be in a good mood. He sharply asked whether I had certain public documents about his involvement in the POW/MIA issue. When I told him I did, he directed me to particular pages in each one. After ten minutes, he sarcastically asked, "My confusion is that, with all of this documentation, what is your question?"

He then went on to challenge my motives for writing the book. "If I am running for office, both parties would die to have a book like this printed." His voice rose. "I have had six people call me saying that you are either working for one party or the other." And, he fumed, "it was supposed to be a book about third parties, and suddenly it is a book on me, after you get access to everybody."

Perot was really upset because the focus of my book had changed. To begin with, I had envisioned a short biography of him, an inside look at his 1992 run for the presidency, and a closing discussion of third-party politics. But the book had slowly evolved into a full-scale biography. Although I had kept Perot's son-in-law informed of the changes, that had not mollified Perot. "From day one,

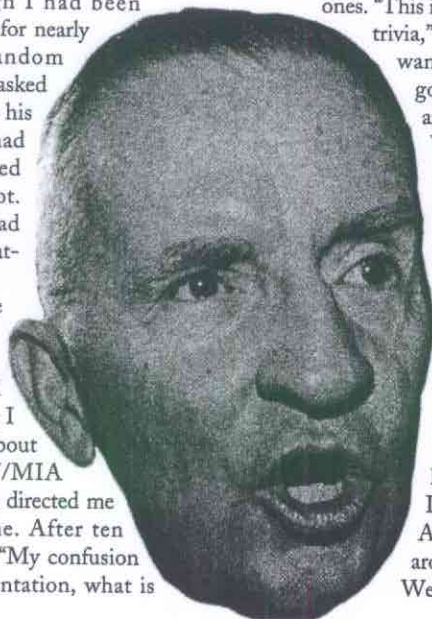
if I knew it was going to be a book about me, I would have skipped out and said I am too busy."

That first call was followed by several more contentious ones. "This is obviously an effort to sell gossip and trivia," he complained at one point. "I don't want to fool with it. . . . Now, if you are going to write a book about odd stuff and make money, then I can't stop you. We had 40,000-some-odd people [employed at EDS, Perot's former company]; you've got four or five people, singing canaries—I think you are getting a hell of a distorted picture."

But slowly Perot became convinced that the book's direction had changed, strictly as a result of what I learned in my reporting, and that my study was serious, not salacious. He agreed to consider an open-ended interview. "I am apprehensive," he told me. "I am talking to a stranger, I am talking to someone I don't know. And I get all this odd stuff popping around, and then my antennae goes up. Well, let's do this. Let me think about it."

But even then, before deciding, he called my editor, Bob Loomis, and also complained to him about the book's new direction. Then suddenly, after a month of quiet, Perot called to announce that he agreed to an interview, with no subject off limits, no questions to be cleared beforehand.

In November 1995, my wife, Trisha, and I traveled to Dallas to meet Perot. Thus commenced phase two of my relationship with him. Perot's sprawling office, ensconced on the seventeenth floor of a modern Dallas high-rise, is a veritable museum of American art and personal memorabilia, with Perot himself as curator. The office proper is set behind swinging glass doors, past a reception area decorated with large bronze eagles and an enormous bust of Teddy Roosevelt. Its occupant greeted Trisha and me



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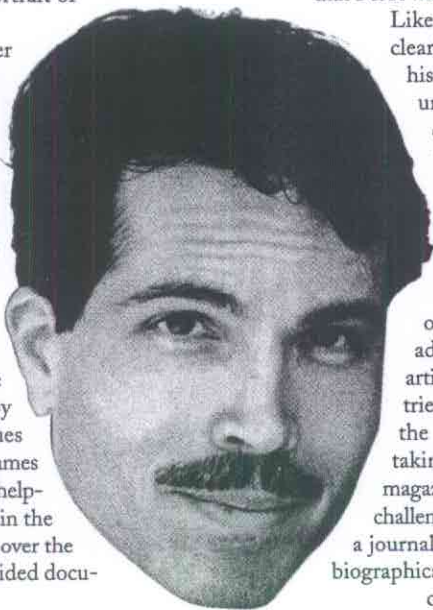
The office's anteroom is dominated by four large Norman Rockwell oil paintings ("That's my life," Perot is fond of saying about the scenes portrayed). There is also a life-size oil portrait of the late Colonel Bull Simons, who led a group of Perot workers to Iran in 1978 to rescue two jailed Perot employees. Remington bronzes stand between the Rockwells.

The room that serves as Perot's private office is crammed with collectibles: three large oil portraits of his daughters, another of his wife, Margot, and more Remington bronzes. Scattered about the office are dozens of photos of Perot with his family and public officials, some awards, and an assortment of unusual items, including Winston Churchill's teapot, the pistol Colonel Simons used on his rescue mission, and a print signed for Perot by hundreds of American POWs. After the tour, Perot slipped into a leather chair behind a massive wooden desk. Directly behind him was a Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington.

The Perot we met that November was completely different from the one who had aggressively challenged me over the telephone. He was gracious to Trisha and me and was forthcoming in our discussions. No mention was made of any of our earlier, unpleasant conversations. Over lunch at Dickeys, a local barbecue joint where the meat is piled high on buffet-size platters, Perot was on his best behavior. Trisha and I spent two days interviewing him, and over the next six months I talked with him by telephone. He often researched issues himself and called me back with the names and addresses of others who might be helpful. He even tracked someone down in the south of France and had him call me over the Memorial Day weekend. Perot provided documents, including internal company books about his business practices; cables and notes from FBI officials; copies of private letters written on his behalf by government officials; interviews, conducted by one of his friends, from his own archives; and even some of his personal papers, from high school and the naval academy. He actually encouraged challenging questions. At one point, after spending considerable time on a question I had raised with him, Perot showed me the evidence he had gathered. "I can nuke the story," he boasted. It troubled me that he encouraged my pursuit of the most controversial matters, because that allowed him to gather evidence to rebut anything negative that might eventually appear in the book.

During our discussions, I discovered that Perot was a collector of information about controversies surrounding

him. When we discussed whether he, as a youngster in Texarkana, had thrown newspapers from horseback and in a poor black neighborhood, Perot produced letters of apology from the "witnesses," who had told another writer that they doubted both stories. When we talked about whether the Nixon administration had sought his help in finding POWs and MIAs, he proudly showed me a letter from Alexander Haig saying just that. As to whether he had financed a soldier of fortune on private missions to rescue MIAs in Southeast Asia, Perot obtained an affidavit from the adventurer denying that he had received Perot money. Regarding a controversy over the Dallas police and his daughter-in-law, Perot brandished a written statement given to him by one of the officers involved. Again, it supported his version of events. Was he a secret client of the late New York lawyer Roy Cohn in a dispute over the design of the Vietnam War Memorial? He had another letter, this time from Cohn's partner, proclaiming that Perot was not the client.



POSNER: "He was on his best behavior."

Like many public figures, Perot is clearly concerned about his place in history. But he wants to exert an unusual degree of control over every aspect of his image. After an unauthorized biography was published in 1989, he threatened to sue, demanding that the publisher and author issue retractions about certain portions. (They refused.) On another occasion, when Perot had obtained advance copies of two magazine articles that he deemed negative, he tried to buy the print runs and have the issues republished with articles taking a more favorable tone. (The magazines involved also declined.) The challenge in writing about Perot is that if a journalist does not obtain access to the biographical information Perot himself has collected, the resulting book may be riddled with errors. On the other hand, if one persuades Perot

to cooperate, one has to struggle not to be smothered by him. Keeping Perot's influence in check was essential to maintaining the integrity of *Citizen Perot*.

Now the question is how Perot will personally react to a serious biography of himself. Somehow, I believe that this man, who has a well-earned reputation for speaking his mind, will not wait long before letting me know. Phase three of my relationship with Perot has not yet started, but I have little doubt that one day this fall, that familiar Texas twang will again be on my answering machine. ■

GERALD POSNER is also the author of *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (Random House).

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